

The Greatest Gift

- I. A Testimony of God's Love
- II. An Assurance of God's Promises

*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Tell me, if we were to go back exactly one year from today, would there be a single one of us who could have predicted that this is what Christmas 2020 would look like? A year ago today, we had chairs set up in the aisles and people packed in like sardines. Today were limited to 25% capacity with every other pew empty. A year ago today we watched the smiles on the faces of our children as they came up for the children's lesson. Today we can't see smiles on anyone's face because we're all wearing masks. A year ago today, we had a church full of people singing Christmas carols from the beginning of the service to the end. Today, we'll be fortunate to sing two songs at the end of the service. All of which may leave us feeling a little, what? Disappointed. It's like, "Is this it? Is this all there is to Christmas this year?"

Kind of reminds me of when little Johnny finally gets to open that big, shiny present that he's been looking forward to open and it turns out that it's not the special toy, or the candy or the video game that he was hoping for. Rather it's three pairs of socks and a notebook. He looks around like "Is that it? Is this all I'm getting?" After so much anticipation, he now feels disappointment.

In fact, I wonder if that might well describe our reaction to this entire year. I mean, 2020 started out with such promise. The economy was booming; the stock market was going great guns. We had the Olympics coming up, and the presidential election. For many of us, we were anticipating a confirmation or a graduation or a wedding. And then came COVID. And it's like everything got canceled, or at least drastically changed. And now with just one week left in the year, we're thinking, "Is that it?" After the year started with so much promise, it sure turned out to be a real dud. Certainly not what we hoped for, not what we expected.

You know, I wonder if the people back in Bethlehem maybe experienced some of those same emotions. I mean think about it. For thousands of years, the Jews had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Messiah. They'd heard the promises of the one who would crush the Serpent's head, the one who would be the Son of the Most High, the one who would be called Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. The one whose kingdom would stretch to the ends of the Earth. And yet, on the night of Jesus' birth, if someone were to stick his head in that stable, and look around and maybe sniff a little bit of the air and then see this helpless baby born to two poor parents lying there in a feed trough, that person might have thought to himself, "This is it? This is how the Son of God makes his entrance into the world? As a baby born in a barn? That's not what I was expecting to see. That's not how I would have drawn up the plan.

In fact, I wonder if there aren't times when you and I might take that same attitude about the things going on in our lives today. We have certain expectations about how we want things to play out. We hope that our lives will be relatively pain-free. We expect that we'll get married and raise a family someday. We'd love to live in a world where people treat each other with respect. But often times, what we hope for, what we expect, is not what we get. And sometimes, that has us looking to God saying "God, is this it? Is this the way it has to be? I had such high hopes. But now I'm feeling disappointed."

The question is, how do we cope with those feelings of disappointment? How do we deal

with situations where things didn't turn out the way we had hoped or expected—whether we're talking about what a Christmas Eve service was like, or how this past year went, or what transpired over the course of our lives? Or to put it another way, when things don't go as we hoped, where do we find our Hope? The answer to that question is simply this. We find hope in a gift, a gift that God gives to each one of us, a gift that we celebrate on this Christmas Eve. Call it the greatest gift of all. For with this gift of a baby, you might say that Hope has Arrived.

Today we're going to spend a little time focusing on what the birth of Jesus Christ means for our lives today, and see how that gift helps us deal with life when things don't always go the way we hoped. And to do that, we're going to turn to a Bible passage that it's not often included among the readings on Christmas Eve. Today we turn to Romans chapter 8, where the Apostle Paul, speaks of God's greatest gift when he writes, *He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* As we dig a little deeper into these words, we'll see that:

### The Greatest Gift

is both:

- I. A Testimony of God's love
- and II. An Assurance of God's promises.

If there's one question that is spooking around in the mind of every human being, it's something along the lines of, "If there's a God in heaven, what does he think of me? Does he love me? Does he care about me? Does he even know what I'm going through in life?" And of course, if a person is going through some really tough times, then those thoughts are even more front and center. Remember when Jesus' disciples were caught in a storm out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee? What did they say to Jesus? "*Lord, don't you care if we drown?*" Deep down, we all want to know, "How does God feel about me? And if he really knows everything I've ever thought, or said, or done, how can he possibly love me? And if, for some inexplicable reason, he did love a sinner like me, how would I ever know that he loves me?" The answer to all those questions is found in these simple words, "*He (namely, God) who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.*"

In other words, if you want to know how God Almighty feels about you, just look in a manger. Look at that baby. That baby is God's love come down to earth for you. And understand that that baby came down to be more than just the centerpiece of every nativity scene, to look cute in the arms of Mary on a Christmas card. That baby came for a purpose. He came as God in the flesh to live the perfect life that you and I could never live, and then die on a cross for all the sins we have committed. That's the real reason God gave his Son to us in the first place. He gave his son to die. Isn't that what Paul means when he says that God *did not spare his Son, gave him up for us all*, as in, he lifted him up on a cross? You want to talk about making the ultimate sacrifice to give someone a gift, there it is. Now, maybe you've made a major sacrifice to give someone a gift. You forked over some major dollars to give your husband the gift he wanted for Christmas. Or maybe the major sacrifice you made was sneaking into the women's clothing section at Kohl's, to get your wife something nice for her birthday, and hoping to goodness that no one sees you. That's not the kind of sacrifice I'm talking about. I'm talking about a Father giving up his Son, so that you could live forever with both of them in heaven someday. That, my friends, is love.

In fact, that expression of God's love at Christmas reminds me of a story that was told by one of my Seminary professors. He described it as the most memorable Christmas he ever had. It

was the year when he was going to celebrate Christmas with his newborn baby for the very first time. With great anticipation, he went to the crib to pick up his child, only to discover that, at some point in the middle of the night, his child had died. I can hardly fathom how painful that it must have been for that new father. And yet, why did Professor Siegbert Becker say that was his most memorable Christmas ever? Because in his words, “It was then that I knew how much God loved me, that he was willing to give up his son for me.”

My friends, when you face your own tragedies in life, when you're tempted to think that God doesn't care about you or that he's a million miles away, then think about the greatest gift God's given you. Because he loves you, God has given you his own. He's given you his best. He's given his Son. And that's what gives us reason to celebrate today—whether the church is packed full or half empty, whether you are sitting with your family or sitting alone in your living room watching this service on your smartphone. You and I can know that we are loved by God because God has already given us the greatest gift. The Greatest Gift is I. a Testimony of God's Love. But it's also II. An Assurance of God's Promises.

I think it's interesting that here in our text, after Paul speaks about what God has done for us in the past, namely, he's given us his Son, he then connects that fact with what God will do for us in the future. How does Paul put it? *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not along with him, graciously give us all things?* Do you see the connection there? This is sometimes called an argument from the greater to the lesser. If this one thing is true, why wouldn't those things be true, too? If God has already accomplished this really big thing, namely, he sent his son to rescue billions of people from spending eternity in hell, then why wouldn't he, why couldn't he, accomplish a whole lot of other things for us as well? Or to put it another way, if God has already kept his first promise, his greatest promise, the one he made to our first parents in the Garden of Eden, that he was going to send someone to crush the Serpent's head—if God has kept that promise, or maybe I should say, since God has kept that promise, well then, you can be sure that he can and will keep the rest of his promises as well, promises that impact our lives on a day to day basis.

Whether it's God's promise to send his holy angels to guard and protect us from harm or his promise to walk with us wherever we go. Who doesn't need that hear that in this age of COVID? Or God's promise that he still controls the nations and the rulers of this world. How does St. Paul put it? *God has placed all things under [Jesus'] feet...for the good of the church. (Eph. 1:22).* Whether it's God's promise that in all things, he works for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28). Or his promise that whoever believes in Jesus will live, even though they die. These are just a few of the promises God has made to us. It's like St. Paul once wrote to the Corinthians, *No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:20).*

Isn't that the truth? If you think about it, all of God's promises are built on the fulfillment of that first very promise, the one he made to our parents in the Garden of Eden, the promise to send a Savior. Because everything happened just as God promised (Jesus was born of a virgin, in the line of David, in the town of Bethlehem Ephrathah, as Immanuel, that is, God with us, who by his death, crushed the serpent's head)—because everything happened just as God promised, you can be sure that everything will happen just as God promised.

In that sense, nothing has really changed, has it? At least not when it comes to Christmas. Oh sure, our service may look and sound a little different today. And our family gatherings may be a little smaller this week. But when it comes to the real meaning of Christmas, God has given us absolutely nothing to be disappointed about. Why do I say that? Because God has given us

the greatest gift of all. He's given us his son, to assure us of his love for us and to guarantee the promises he's made to us. And that's what fills our hearts with joy and hope, even when our circumstances in life may not be everything we hoped they would be. You realize, the world doesn't get that. The world looks at that little baby and says, "Is that it? Is that what your hope is built on? And we say, "Oh, that's it, alright. That baby is everything we've ever hoped for and everything we truly need." And that makes that child given by God, for us, the Greatest Gift ever. Merry Christmas, my friends! Amen.